Modal Realism and Coincident Objects

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Abstract

Imagine two objects, a lump of clay called Lumpl and a statue named Goliath, which are created and destroyed simultaneously, sharing all spatiotemporal properties. Despite their complete coincidence throughout existence, they appear to possess different properties, leading to a philosophical debate among metaphysicians. Monists argue for their identity, while pluralists deny it. Pluralists face the challenge of explaining the differences between these coincident objects, while monists must account for the modal differences if they are identical. Monists often turn to Lewisean modal realism to reject pluralism and explain the differences, claiming it offers qualitative parsimony. However, I will argue that Lewisean modal realism is not truly parsimonious and cannot be used to reject pluralism and explain the modal differences between Lumpl and Goliath due to inherent circularity in the theory.

Modal Realism

The grounding problem revolves around the conundrum of coinciding objects. Consider Lumpl, a lump of clay, and Goliath, a statue, both created and destroyed simultaneously. They share all spatiotemporal properties and are subject to the same physical forces - any action on Lumpl affects Goliath and vice versa. Throughout their existence, they are completely coincident. The puzzle arises because, on one hand, it appears that only one entity exists at Lumpl's location: a clay statue that exists temporarily. Advocates of this view, called one-thingers or monists, argue that despite having different names, Lumpl and Goliath are identical since they share identical physical and spatiotemporal structures.

On the other hand, there is a simple solution to this puzzle: the lump and the statue have different modal properties, making them distinct according to Leibniz's law of indiscernibility of identicals. For example, Lumpl can be squished into a ball, while Goliath cannot. Advocates of this perspective, known as multi-thingers or pluralists, assert that "Lumpl" and "Goliath" refer to different entities.

If pluralism is correct and Lumpl and Goliath indeed have different modal properties, the challenge lies in explaining the basis of these differences. Pluralists must provide a satisfactory

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explanation for what grounds these differences, especially considering they share all physical constitutions and spatiotemporal properties.

Monists also face the challenge of explaining the existence of different modal properties between Lumpl and Goliath if they are identical. In my view, monists have two potential strategies to address this challenge. They can either argue that Lumpl and Goliath do not genuinely possess distinct properties, or they can posit that the modal differences do not necessarily imply that Goliath is not identical to Lumpl. However, the latter approach may raise concerns regarding the violation of Leibniz's Law.

Alternatively, monists could adopt a deflationary stance and acknowledge the modal differences between Lumpl and Goliath, attributing these differences to linguistic or nominal conventions that are already accepted. For instance, while it may be true to assert that Lumpl is possibly squishable while Goliath is not, this distinction is contingent upon how the object is described or referred to. Therefore, there is only one object, and the modal differences arise from variations in description or reference.

Another potential approach that monists can consider to explain the modal differences between Lumpl and Goliath is modal realism. This involves adopting the perspective of modal realism proposed by David Lewis, a well-known reductive account of modality. By embracing this theory, monists can maintain the identity of Lumpl and Goliath while asserting that one can survive squashing while the other cannot. Although this may initially seem contradictory, the concern is alleviated when the modal properties of objects are understood as reducible to the categorical properties of their counterparts.

The objective of this paper is to evaluate the assertion that modal realism can effectively address the challenge posed to monists by the grounding problem. To accomplish this goal, we first provide a brief overview of Lewis's modal realism.

Lewis defines modal concepts as follows: something is necessary if it is true in all possible worlds, and something is possible if it is true in at least one possible world. Initially, there is no distinction between Lewis's account and other approaches that utilize possible worlds to analyze modality. However, the divergence arises when Lewis clarifies his concept of possible worlds. To achieve his reductive goal, Lewis endeavors to explain possible worlds solely in terms of non-modal elements. He employs set theory and classical extensional mereology to construct his genuine realism concerning possible worlds. Lewis's assumption of unrestricted mereological composition posits that for any collection of objects, there is an object that encompasses all of them.

Another crucial aspect of Lewis's theory is his conception of possible worlds as concrete entities similar to our own world. Each possible world comprises all concrete entities it contains, akin to our world being the sum of its inhabitants and surroundings. Modal propositions and sentences are predominantly expressed in two ways: de dicto and de re. De dicto sentences involve modal

terms describing the truth of a statement, while de re sentences attribute modal properties directly to an individual.

Every theory of possible worlds must provide satisfactory explanations for both de dicto and de re modes. Lewis's theory also aims to explain these modes to support its reductive goal. Lewisian reduction of de dicto modality entails that a sentence is true in a possible world if it is true when all its quantifiers are limited to members of that world. Similarly, Lewisian reduction of de re modality posits that counterpart theory can account for de re modal claims. According to this theory, an object's counterpart in a different world bears the burden of de re modality. Furthermore, Lewis's interpretation of actuality challenges the intuitive assumption that our world is the only actual world. He argues that actuality is an indexical term that varies from world to world, similar to other indexical terms like "here" and "there." Despite its advantages, Lewis's theory of modality has faced criticism from various perspectives, and numerous objections have been raised against it. However, proponents highlight its ability to analyze complex modal claims without relying on modal terms.

In conclusion, this paper focuses on assessing the claim that Lewis's modal realism can address the grounding problem for monists, considering its potential to provide an alternative approach to understanding modality.

The Role of Modal Realism in Supporting Monism

In the context of coinciding objects, pluralists argue that:

Lumpl is possibly squishable.

Goliath is not possibly squishable.

Therefore, Lumpl is not identical to Goliath.

However, monists can invoke the counterpart theory to challenge the pluralist conclusion drawn from these premises. Divers has applied Lewis's counterpart theory to defend monism, suggesting that Lewisians can refute the above modal argument by showing that either it is invalid or not the case that both premises are true. According to Divers, two scenarios arise regarding the counterpart relations invoked in the truth conditions attributed to the premises of the argument. In the univocal case, the same counterpart relation is invoked in the interpretation of both premises, leading to a valid argument. However, both premises cannot be true simultaneously. In this interpretation, Lumpl has an origin-counterpart that is squishable, implying that Lumpl and its counterpart are similar in every aspect except that Lumpl takes the

form of Goliath while its counterpart is squished into a ball. In the equivocal case, different counterpart relations are invoked for the premises to invalidate the argument.

Lewis's theory allows for the invocation of different counterpart relations for the same objects based on relevant similarity criteria, explaining the modal differences between Lumpl and Goliath without requiring differences between them in our world. This approach asserts that Lumpl and Goliath are the same objects but may invoke different counterparts based on different similarity metrics. Thus, Goliath or Lumpl in our world has an origin-counterpart squished into a ball, while Goliath lacks a career-counterpart squished into a ball because all career-counterparts of the object are in the form of a statue. Regarding the grounding problem, Lewis's counterpart theory maintains that Lumpl is identical to Goliath and yet claims that one can survive squishing while the other cannot. Based on modal realism and counterpart theory, the modal profiles of Lumpl and Goliath are grounded upon the categorical properties of individuals existing in other concrete worlds. Therefore, Lumpl and Goliath do not have genuinely different modal properties; their counterparts bear the burden of the modal features ascribed to them, making them identical. However, despite its potential to address the grounding problem from a monistic perspective, Lewis's theory appears bizarre and counter-intuitive due to its commitment to the existence of peculiar entities. Modal realism is not widely accepted among metaphysicians dealing with modality due to its peculiarity and various objections it faces. In conclusion, Lewis's approach can resolve the grounding problem by appealing to counterpart theory and modal realism. While successful in explaining and grounding modal properties, Lewis's theory faces challenges regarding its counter-intuitiveness and commitment to peculiar entities. The theory's success hinges on its ability to maintain qualitative parsimony and avoid commitment to modal properties, making it subject to scrutiny if it fails to satisfy these criteria.

Lewis's modal realism is appealing only when it maintains qualitative parsimony and can elucidate the modal characteristics of objects without circularity. This noncircular reduction of modal features is crucial for its explanatory power, as without it, the theory becomes inadequate when considering the costs and benefits. By utilizing Lewis's counterpart theory to address the grounding problem, Divers acknowledges the advantage of Lewisean ontology's parsimony, which aligns with monism. Despite attempts to dismiss it, the circularity objection to modal realism remains relevant, as Lewisean worlds and their inhabitants inherently possess modal characteristics. This limitation highlights why modal realism is unsuitable for addressing the grounding problem, as Lewis's theory relies on primitive modal features to adequately explain modal properties. Thus, Lewis's theory faces a dilemma: it can either prioritize qualitative parsimony but remain inadequate as a theory of modality, or maintain material adequacy by introducing primitive modal entities into its ontology, thereby compromising its reductive nature. Neither option is appealing for monists from a metaphysical standpoint.

Conclusion

In summary, Lewis's theory fails to provide a satisfactory explanation for modal features and consequently cannot resolve the grounding problem in favor of monism. Monists require an appropriate theory of modality to explain the differences between Lumpl and Goliath. Given the limitations of Lewis's theory, it cannot meet this requirement and address the concerns of monists regarding the grounding problem.

For details look at the bibliographies

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